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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to acquire information about poor black children who were successful readers in order to determine what can be done to increase the number of such children. For purposes of the study, "successful" was defined as scoring at or above grade level on a standardized reading test at the end of fifth grade, while "poor" was defined as being eligible for free meals and milk. Data on the 23 subjects were collected through observations, review of school records, and interviews with the students, teachers, administrators, and parents, as well as other family members. The findings indicated the following factors to be of importance in producing successful readers: (1) preschool reading ability, (2) families that were interested in school because they saw achievement there as a step toward a life that would be better than their own, (3) student love of reading, (4) contacts with other good readers through homogeneously grouped classes, and the use of challenging materials within those classes. (FL)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Reading Education Report No. 33

A STUDY OF POOR BLACK CHILDREN WHO ARE SUCCESSFUL READERS

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A Study of Poor Black Children Who Are Successful Readers

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, reports of what came to be called "schools that work" appeared fairly frequently in journals and newspapers. Each described individual elementary schools that were successful in teaching poor black children to read. While these accounts provided a refreshing and hopeful contrast to the far more numerous reports of failure, none included information about individual students. Instead, the focus was on administrators, teachers, instructional programs, and the achievements of groups of students. On the assumption that information about successful individuals from low-income families is just as valuable for improving achievement as are data about successful schools, a study of poor black children who are good readers was undertaken.

Review of the Literature

To sketch what had already been done and learned when plans for the present study were being made, what the literature says about "schools that work" with low-income minority children will be summarized first. After that, research in which the classroom is the unit of study will be reviewed. Finally, existing information about successful individuals will be reported.

Schools

What was most striking about the reports of successful schools found initially (Benjamin, 1981; Rutter & Madge, 1976; Salganik, 1980; Singer, 1977; Venezky & Winfield, 1979; Weber, 1971) is the similarity of their conclusions about characteristics of schools that are important for

teaching poor minority children to read. The similarity was reinforced later when an article by Edmonds (1979) was located in which he carefully reviewed existing studies before telling about his own. Whether the focus is successful schools or a comparison of those that are successful with those that are not, all the reports consistently show that groups of minority children from low-income families are most likely to be at or above grade level in reading when the schools they attend:

1. have strong leadership from someone (usually the principal) who is knowledgeable about reading and actively involved in the reading program.
2. are achievement oriented.
3. have high expectations for students, with special attention going to reading or to reading and mathematics.
4. have an instructional program for reading that is clearly articulated and systematically implemented.

Classrooms

Classrooms rather than schools were the unit of analysis in an extensive study done by Cooley and Leinhardt (1980). They explain: "The major objective . . . was to identify classroom procedures that are particularly effective in teaching reading and mathematics to 'disadvantaged children' in regular, primary grade classrooms" (p. 8). For the reading phase of their research, 104 grade-one classrooms and 109 grade-three classrooms were involved. Teacher interviews, videotapes of classrooms, and analyses of curricula provided the data.

Among the many findings of the Cooley and Leinhardt study are the following, the first of which matches a conclusion reported in an earlier study of black, inner-city children in first grade (Harris & Serwer, 1966).

1. The time officially allotted to reading bears little relationship to achievement. What counts is the actual amount of time spent teaching it.
2. What gets taught is more important for achievement than how it is taught.
3. The amount of pull-out instruction (low-achievers leave a classroom to receive instruction elsewhere from a "specialist") bears little relationship to achievement, either for the children who remain in the classroom or for those who leave it temporarily.

Two other studies also focused on classrooms and teachers. The report of one (Rist, 1970) tells about kindergartners taught by a black teacher in an all-black ghetto school. According to Rist, the children were divided into groups ("those expected to learn" and "those not expected to learn"), not on the basis of diagnostic information but in relation to cleanliness, physical appearance, speech, and social status. Rist further claims that once the kindergartners were in groups, each received "differential treatment." More teacher contact was made with the positively perceived children, for instance, than with the others. After observing the same subjects in the last half of second grade, Rist states that what he was seeing was another example of the self-fulfilling prophecy: Children achieve what they are expected to achieve.

A similar theme underlies another report of classrooms and teachers (Pedersen, Faucher, & Eaton, 1978). In this case, data were school records plus retrospective accounts by black adults of three first-grade teachers in an inner-city school. According to the authors, their findings show that the adults who had "Miss A" in first grade did consistently better throughout elementary school in both achievement and effort. Calling "Miss A" a "significant other" in the lives of children, the researchers claim that which teacher the adults had turned out to be more significant for both school achievement and vocational success than such variables as gender, home stability, completeness of family, and geographic mobility. As described by the adults and interpreted by the authors, Miss A's classroom was one in which "it did not matter what background or abilities the beginning pupil had . . . there was no way that the pupil was not going to read by the end of grade one" (p. 19). Although flawed in numerous and obvious ways, this study does suggest the possibility that at least some of the poor black children who make it insofar as reading is concerned have a "significant other" in their lives whose influence is positive.

Individuals

As was mentioned, research with individual black children who are both poor and successful in reading are scarce. One study (Durkin, 1966) whose concern was for early readers, whether white or black, included the latter; however, of the 12 black children identified as having some ability in reading prior to the start of school instruction, only one belonged to what Warner's six-level "Index of Social Class Scale" (Warner, Meeker, & Eels, 1949) calls the lower-lower class. While a visit to this

subject's home did show it to be marked by poverty, it was rich with library books. Based on interview data, it was also a home in which the mother was an avid reader and in which the oldest of the seven children read routinely to the youngest, one of whom was a preschool reader.

Another study of success among low-income black children in Central Harlem, New York, was done by Greenberg and Davidson (1972). This one concentrated on the families of 80 high achievers (scored at or above grade level on a reading test in fifth grade) and 80 low achievers (scored at least two years below grade level) in order to identify possible differences. Data from parent interviews showed that the high achievers came from homes that were more structured and orderly and in which there was some rationale for discipline. Parents of high achievers were also more aware of their children as individuals, showed more concern for education, and were more knowledgeable about current events. Variables that failed to distinguish between the families of the two groups were: (a) absence of father, (b) working mother, (c) number of children in family, (d) number of schools attended, and (e) enrollment in nursery school and kindergarten.

The Present Study

As was implied at the start of this report, the purpose of the present study was to acquire information about poor black children who are successful readers with the hope that what was learned might provide guidelines for increasing the number who succeed. Another way to describe the purpose is to say that the research was an effort to account for what Rutter (1979) calls invulnerability: "the factors which protect children

and enable them to develop normally in spite of stress and disadvantage" (p. 298).

Plans for the Study

The first decision for the study had to do with the definition of "poor black children who are successful readers." "Successful" was defined as scoring at or above grade level on a standardized reading test at the end of grade five, which allowed for data collection during the subjects' last year in elementary school. The definition also ensured that the subjects' success extended beyond the primary grades. "Poor" was defined as being eligible for both free meals and milk.

Other decisions were based on the existing literature. It was assumed, for instance, that at least some of the subjects would be enrolled in schools similar to those described as "schools that work" with poor minority students. Once subjects were identified, therefore, principals of the schools they attended would be interviewed in order to learn about administrators and reading programs.

It was further hypothesized that when all the subjects' teachers from kindergarten through grade five were identified, certain ones would show up more frequently than others, in which case they would be interviewed and their classrooms observed in order to see whether anything about them might help to account for the subjects' success--for example, positive expectations, generous amounts of direct, explicit instruction, efficient use of time, and so on.

Since the subjects' performance in reading was out of the ordinary, a question naturally arose about how they would perform on an intelligence

test. The direct dependence of scores from group-administered intelligence tests on reading ability pointed to the need for an individually-administered test. The one selected was the WISC-R (Wechsler, 1974).

That the subjects' explanations of their success might be another source of helpful information accounted for the decision to interview them individually. Because knowing children requires knowing their families and, second, because the existing literature inevitably shows that family factors enter into success with reading, parent interviews also seemed essential.

One more decision was that only those subjects who scored at least one-half year above grade level on the fifth-grade reading test (and only the parents of such subjects) would be interviewed. This decision was made to ensure that neither the lower-scoring subjects nor their parents reached exaggerated conclusions about their success and ability. Or, to put it differently, limiting interviews to the highest achievers was done to avoid fostering unrealistic expectations that might in the long run be harmful.

Locale of the Study

Selecting a school system for the study took into account a number of factors. To begin, it had to have enough black students from low SES areas to make it likely that some would be successful readers. Since the collection of data involved many people and would go on for a considerable amount of time, it had to be a school system in which interest and cooperation seemed sufficient to last a year.[1] Finally, it had to be one

in which a standardized reading test is administered at the end of grade five.

With these three needs in mind, the selected school system was located in a Midwestern city with a population of 94,081 according to 1980 census data, 84.7 percent of whom are white while 14.6 percent are black. The remaining 0.7 percent are classified as "Other." The public elementary schools number 25, seven of which are in racially mixed neighborhoods. Busing achieves desegregation in the others.

Since 1970, all the elementary schools use the Lippincott basal program in kindergarten and first grade, which means a heavy emphasis on phonics occurs at the beginning. Starting in grade two, a switch is made to the Ginn basal series, but only after the skills covered through Book E in the Lippincott program are learned. For some students, therefore, the transition to Ginn takes place early in second grade whereas with others, Lippincott materials might be used throughout grade two.

The school system has six reading specialists, each of whom works half time for the district and half time in the Title I program. Time financed by the schools is used primarily to help the 369 teachers working at the kindergarten through grade six levels. There are also 20 full-time Title I teachers and 11 others who are employed half time, the latter allowing for full-day kindergartens for children from low-income families assessed as needing special or at least additional help.

Selection of Subjects

Subjects were identified on the basis of fifth-grade reading scores. Table 1 summarizes test data for all fifth graders tested with the SRA

Assessment Survey, Achievement Series, Form E, Blue Level (Naslund, Thorpe, & Lefever, 1971). It divides the students by race but not by socioeconomic status since data for the latter were not available for the total population of fifth graders. Table 1 also describes the achievement of the 23 children, 12 girls and 11 boys, who qualified as subjects.

Insert Table 1 about here.

Findings

Once subjects were identified, information from school records that might highlight their individuality (e.g., size of family) or help explain their success (e.g., reading scores in grades 1-4) was recorded. That information will be described first, after which data from the WISC-R and the various interviews will be reported.

School Records

What became clear immediately was that the subjects were not children who attended one school from kindergarten through grade five. Although 17 of the 23 had been enrolled in the selected school system from kindergarten through fifth grade, only three remained in the same school. The number of transfers for the children in this group of 17 ranged from zero to seven, the average number being 2.9.

Enrollment data for the total group of 23 subjects showed that the number of years in which they were in the selected school system from kindergarten through grade five ranged from 1.5 to six years. Since the mean was 5.3 years, the subjects as a group can be thought of as being more influenced by this school system than by any other.

The Metropolitan Readiness Test (Hildreth, Griffiths, & McGauvran, 1965) was administered in kindergarten in April during the year subjects were kindergartners. Of the 18 who attended kindergarten in the school system from which subjects were selected, readiness scores (percentiles) were recorded for only 13. These percentile scores ranged from 43 to 97 with a mean of 72.9. According to school records, 14 of the 18 children were enrolled in a full-day kindergarten program.

Available reading scores for grades 1-5 are in Table 2, which also reflects how subjects transferred in and out of the selected school system.

Insert Table 2 about here.

(All the data in Table 2 are from tests administered by the school system.) For example, only 17 of the 23 subjects were in the selected school system at the time the third grade reading test was administered.

When available scores for individual subjects are inspected from grade to grade, the general impression is one of an excellent beginning followed by steady growth--with an exception here and there. Even though the group data in Table 2 prompt the same conclusion, report card grades for reading were sometimes unexpectedly low in relation to test scores. Data from teacher and subject interviews later indicated that report card grades reflected the number and quality of written exercises turned in more than they did a child's ability to read something like a book.

On the assumption that absence from school in grades 1-5 has a negative effect on reading achievement, the number of days absent for each of the 17 subjects who were in the school system throughout grades 1-5 was noted. For the five years, the total number ranged from 15 to 135.5

with a mean of 56.2 days. (The standard deviation is 36.1.) The Pearson correlation coefficient for total number of days absent during grades 1-5 and reading raw score achieved at the end of fifth grade is .06, clearly not supportive of the hypothesis that missing school has a negative effect on achievement.

School records showed that two of the 23 subjects had been retained, one in first grade, the other in fourth. (At the end of grade five, the grade-equivalent reading scores for the two were 6.4 and 6.2, respectively.) "Finds work difficult" explained the first grade retention, whereas three reasons were cited for keeping the other child in fourth grade for two years: "Didn't hand in work. Refuses to do assignments. Failed math."

At the start of fifth grade, the chronological age of the 23 subjects ranged from 9 years, 10 months to 11 years, 6 months. The mean CA was 10.5 years. (When the two subjects who had been retained are eliminated, the mean CA is 10.4 years.)

Initially, school records were used to learn about the make-up of the 23 subjects' families; however, certain information was changed following the subject and parent interviews because it was either out of date or incorrect. Based on interview responses, the number of children in the subjects' families (including the subject) during the year they were in sixth grade ranged from one to seven with a mean of 3.2. Four subjects were singletons. In the remaining 19 families, 12 were the oldest child whereas three were the youngest. In eight of these 19 families, the children had different surnames, a fact referred to by principals and teachers as one that sometimes made it difficult to know which children were members of the same family.

Seven of the 23 subjects lived with two parents; however, in only three cases were both parents the subjects' natural parents. In the 16 homes where there was one parent, it was a mother in all cases but one.

When "other adults" are added to "parents," the total number of adults in the subjects' homes ranged from one to four. In nine instances, the other adults were one or two grandparents. When school records and interview data were compared, one additional finding was that grandparents, aunts, and cousins come and go, making for a frequently changing family structure and size.

WISC-R Data

None of the school records included intelligence test data; consequently, except for the fact that the subjects were at or above grade level in reading, nothing was available that allowed for a hunch about how they might perform on an intelligence test. The one chosen to answer that question was the WISC-R (Wechsler, 1974), which yields Verbal, Performance, and Full-Scale IQ scores. It was administered by a doctoral student in Special Education[2] whose only knowledge of the subjects was that each had scored at or above grade level in reading in fifth grade. This positive fact was used to explain to the subjects why they were being asked to take the test. In only one case were testing conditions questionable because of noise in the hall. The girl taking the test, who was described later by her teacher as being "average, only very average in ability" attained a Full-Scale IQ of 94.

Administration of the WISC-R began in February and ended in early April during the year the subjects were in sixth grade. Testing time ranged from 1 hour and 15 minutes to 1 hour and 50 minutes. Results are summarized in Table 3. Correlations for WISC-R scores and fifth-grade reading scores are in the next table, Table 4. Although the strong association between intelligence test scores and reading scores, which is shown in Table 4, would be expected, IQ's from the WISC-R (Table 3) are lower than was anticipated. To the extent that this test is valid for assessing the intellectual level of low-income black children, it has to

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Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here.

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be concluded that for most of the 23 subjects, superior intellectual ability does not account for their "invulnerability." What the data obtained in the interviews have to say about invulnerability will be considered now.

Interviews with Principals

Interviewing principals was viewed as a means for learning whether the reported characteristics of "schools that work" with low-income minority students described their schools. It was also thought that principals might be able to provide relevant information about the subjects. In fact, the interviewer's initial question was: "I'm trying to learn why certain children from poor families do well in reading even though so many others from similar backgrounds do not. What do you know about _____ that might explain his/her success?"[3] The remaining questions were equally

open-ended. The second one asked, "Is there anything in particular about your school that might have contributed to _____'s success?" (Although space under this question was allotted to the categories (a) Administration, (b) Faculty, and (c) Reading Program, direct questions about the three were not asked on the assumption that what was really thought to be a contributing factor would be mentioned without prompts.) The third question was, "What do you know about the family of _____ that might help explain his/her success?" Following that, a question inquired about the friends of the subject, in particular, whether they might have been an influence (positive or negative) on his or her success with reading. Principal interviews concluded with, "Can you tell me anything else about _____ that might help account for his/her success in reading?"

At the time the interviews were held, the 23 subjects were in sixth grade in 13 schools, hence 13 principals were interviewed, four of whom were women. One of the 13 was a black male; all the others were white. One school had five subjects, another had four, three more had two subjects each, while the other eight schools had one. To avoid promoting unwarranted conclusions, the fact that nine subjects were in two schools must be placed in juxtaposition with another fact: Records indicated that the nine had transferred from one school to another an average of 3.7 times between kindergarten and grade six. The number of transfers for each individual comprising this subgroup ranged from zero to six.

Although frequent transfers is an obvious reason for the principals' knowing unexpectedly little about the subjects, it was not the only explanation, since questions about the three students who attended one school continuously from kindergarten to grade six were anything but

successful in generating information. A second reason became clear soon after the interviews began and was stated explicitly by a principal who said, "One reason I don't know _____ is that he hasn't been in trouble."

The lack of trouble may also explain why principals often knew little or even nothing about the subjects' families. This is suggested by the fact that the majority of parents who were known had been contacted because of a problem with a subject (N = 1), with a subject's sibling (N = 3), or with both (N = 1). Three other mothers were known because, according to the principals, they were overly aggressive women who made frequent contacts with the school. One more mother was known because she and the principal shared jury duty the previous summer. What is important to note is that principals described every one of these parents (including the three characterized as being aggressive and, in one case, militant) with words like "supportive of the school," "cooperative," "concerned about their children," "interested in education." At times, parents of the subjects were contrasted with others (black and white) in the same school who were said to be "hard to find," "irresponsible," "indifferent," and "uncooperative."

While the parents known to principals were always credited with making contributions to their children's academic accomplishments because they were "cooperative," what the schools themselves contributed was almost never pinpointed in the interviews with principals. Sometimes, in fact, it was completely bypassed even when the interviewer asked, "Is there anything in particular about your school that might have contributed to

_____'s success?" In responding to this question, five principals referred to a subject's high intelligence with comments like, "I think he's just a bright kid. He's one who would do well no matter what the circumstances." (The child referred to had an IQ of 118. The remaining four described as being bright had IQs of 120, 116, 110, and 100.) Responding to the same question about the school's contribution, another principal commented about the large amount of general information that a subject had, but she was quick to say that she did not know how it had been acquired. One more said that being in just two schools from kindergarten on made the difference for the subject in his school.

Responses that related to the question ("Is there anything in particular about your school that might have contributed to _____'s success?") and the frequency with which they were offered, follow:

Teachers' positive expectations ($\underline{N}$ = 3)

Conscientious, industrious faculty ($\underline{N}$ = 1)

Placement of subject with best readers ($\underline{N}$ = 3)

One other principal responded to the question about the school's contribution by describing the materials that were used district-wide. Two more were very articulate about the materials their schools used in addition to the required texts. Based on interview data, only these two administrators appeared to be highly knowledgeable about reading.

To sum up, then, it was concluded from interview data that, as a group, the 13 principals assigned much of the credit for the subjects' success to family factors and, second, that they themselves were more involved with behavior than with academics. That they provided little input into the

reading program was verified later when teachers were interviewed. Asked, "Does the principal have much involvement with the reading program?" only two responded positively. In one instance, the principal was a former reading specialist who, even as a principal, worked with low achievers. The other spent time periodically with groups of students on special literary topics. Both were women and were referred to earlier in this report as being the most knowledgeable of the 13 principals about reading.

Interviews with Teachers

The original decision to interview teachers was based on the assumption that when the teachers who had taught the 23 subjects from kindergarten through grade five were identified, certain names would show up with far greater frequency than others. At the time, interviewing such persons was thought to be a way to learn about the characteristics of teachers who succeed with poor minority children--who might be, as Pedersen, et al. (1978) suggested, "a significant other" in the subjects' lives. The assumption, however, proved to be incorrect, perhaps because of the large number of different teachers that the subjects had had due to the many times they transferred from one school to another. Because omitting teachers from the study seemed indefensible, a second decision was made: Current teachers--that is, sixth-grade teachers--of subjects who scored at least one-half year above grade level on the fifth-grade reading test would be interviewed in order to see how they might explain the children's success. (As was mentioned earlier, the same criterion was used to decide about which subjects and parents would be interviewed.) With this criterion, interviews were scheduled with teachers of 15 subjects (8 girls and 7 boys)

during February.[4] It was thought that by mid-year, they would know the subjects well enough to provide accurate information. Fifth-grade reading test data along with WISC-R scores for this subsample of subjects are in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 about here.

The 15 highest achievers were in 10 schools and were being taught in sixth grade by 11 teachers, one of whom was black. (Of the 369 elementary classroom teachers in the school system, 27 are black.) Eight of the teachers were women and three were men.

Arrangements for teaching reading varied from school to school and determined who was interviewed. Four subjects were in departmentalized programs, thus their "reading teachers" were interviewed. Nine subjects were in self-contained classrooms for high achievers--sometimes referred to as "the gifted." Attending a small school, another subject was in the only sixth-grade class available. Still another was in a fifth-sixth grade combination class, also for high achievers.

Since the 11 teachers who were interviewed had not contributed to the subjects' fifth-grade reading scores, questions centered not on their own teaching practices but on the subjects, on their families, and on how school might have contributed to their success in reading. What was learned from the teachers about the 15 families can be covered quickly since, like

the principals, they knew little about them, perhaps because parent conferences were not mandatory nor regularly scheduled. More specifically, even though (with one exception) the teachers had been with the 15 subjects since the start of the school year, nine responses to the question, "What do you know about _____'s family?" were:

"I think both parents work. That's all I know."

"I don't know much. Whenever anything goes home to be signed, it's returned promptly."

"There might be some custody problem, but I don't know for sure."

"I think she has a twin and maybe a brother, but I'm not sure."

"I know nothing about the family at all."

"I don't know a thing about the family."

"He doesn't have a father, and I know absolutely nothing about the mother."

"Only hearsay. I've heard our principal say that the family is supportive of teachers."

"I know nothing."

Responses to questions about the families of the other six subjects hardly revealed detailed information; nonetheless, they showed that the teacher had met the subject's mother and that the principals' earlier characterization of the families as being cooperative and interested in their children's school work was supported.

The question, "Is this fifth-grade reading test score (which was specified by the interviewer) an accurate indication of _____'s ability?" switched the focus of the teacher interviews away from the families to the subjects themselves. Although the teachers seemed unaware of the scores, responses to the question were affirmative in all but one

instance. The exception was explained with a reference to the poor quality of the subject's written work--for instance, written answers to questions about a basal reader selection, workbook pages, and ditto sheet exercises. Actually, concern about this type of written work permeated all the teacher interviews. To illustrate, whenever achievement (or the lack of it) was the topic, performance on written assignments was mentioned. As was reported earlier, both the quality and quantity of written responses also loomed large when report card grades were given.

Whenever achievement was the topic being considered in a teacher interview, references to the readers in the Ginn basal program in which subjects were currently working were also inevitable. In fact, that was how ability seemed to be judged. ("Guidelines" from the central office of the school system suggest use of the reader described as Level 13 for "fast" sixth graders. In February, when the teacher interviews were held, five of the 15 subjects were in Level 13, eight were completing Level 12, and two were in Level 11 readers.)

When teachers were asked to name characteristics of a subject that contributed to his or her success in reading, the following answers were given with the indicated frequency:

Bright ($\underline{N}$ = 9)

Willing to work ($\underline{N}$ = 4)

Likes to read ($\underline{N}$ = 3)

Has lots of background information ($\underline{N}$ = 2)

Uses time well ($\underline{N}$ = 2)

Wants to be the best--wants to win ($\underline{N}$ = 2)

Curious about everything ($\underline{N}$ = 1)

Cares about school work (N = 1)

Does good written work (N = 1)

Conscientious about homework (N = 1)

Wants to please adults (N = 1)

Although "likes to read" was mentioned only three times as being a contributor to a subject's success, seven additional subjects were portrayed as being "readers" during the course of the teacher interviews. Specifically:

"He often sits with a book. He understands everything he reads."

"She does a lot of reading and refers to it in discussions."

"She does a lot of reading."

"Apparently, someone gave him a love for reading. He reads all the time."

"He likes to read. Some teacher must have really helped him. He reads everything--library books, the encyclopedia."

"He seems to like to read. He goes to the library often."

"When she finishes her work, she'll often read."

When the focus of the interviews was on subjects' characteristics that might impede achievement, teachers named the following:

Doesn't always do homework. (N = 3)

Does only the minimum, but does it well. (N = 2)

Is moody. (N = 2)

Doesn't get work done on time. (N = 1)

Has difficulty with written work. (N = 1)

Works in spurts. (N = 1)

Is highly disorganized. (N = 1)

Is not a quick thinker. (N = 1)

Is a little too shy. (N = 1)

Isn't in any one school long enough. (N = 1)

Has serious medical problems. (N = 1)

Is a "clown." (N = 1)

Is volatile, emotional, stubborn. (N = 1)

Is too boy crazy. (N = 1)

As was mentioned, the 15 highest achievers among the 23 subjects were attending 10 schools in sixth grade. Asked if anything about these schools might help to account for the subjects' success with reading, the teachers gave most of the credit to ability grouping:

Ability grouping helps. (N = 2)

I don't know. (N = 2)

School is "geared toward individualization." (N = 1)[5]

Ability grouping put subject with good students where there's time to teach because discipline is no problem. (N = 1)

Sixth graders are divided on the basis of ability. Members of the best class don't transfer as much and have a chance to learn. (N = 1)

School has a hard working faculty. (N = 1)

Subject has had good teachers. (N = 1)

School's relatively stable population "allows faculty to be more caring." (N = 1)

Ability grouping leads to high expectations for the best students. (N = 1)

We have a "strong faculty." (N = 1)

The "smallness" of the school "promotes an excellent atmosphere for learning." (N = 1)

What needs to be kept in mind about the responses listed above is that only three of the fifteen subjects attended the same school from kindergarten on. Or, to put it differently, frequent transfers are an obstacle in arriving at an understanding of how school factors affect achievement.

The last question asked of the 11 teachers was: "Is there anything that distinguishes _____ from most poor black children? Responses and the frequency with which each was given are listed below:

Has more background information. (N = 5)

Has a larger vocabulary. (N = 3)

Has a mother who supports the school. (N = 2)

Is more cooperative. (N = 2)

Doesn't have a chip on her shoulder. (N = 2)

Cares about school work. (N = 1)

Doesn't have the hostility often seen in black girls. (N = 1)

Has better speech. (N = 1)

Probably has a better self-concept because of success. (N = 1)

Is less impetuous. (N = 1)

Is brighter. (N = 1)

Fights less. (N = 1)

Does beautifully in English. (N = 1)

Wants to please. (N = 1)

Summary: Principal and Teacher Interviews

Once data from the principal and teacher interviews were analyzed, it had to be concluded that neither source of information offered compelling evidence that the school was a vital force in the subjects' accomplishments. The reading program for the district, described as "coming from the downtown office," was clearly basal reader oriented, hardly an uncommon practice. What was done to supplement basal materials was described for just two schools. Only once was a librarian mentioned; that occurred when a teacher commented about a subject's frequent use of the library. The teacher's exact comment was, "We have an excellent librarian."

Like teachers who have been observed in other research (Durkin, 1978-79), those interviewed in this study made frequent references to assignments and the quality of the subjects' efforts with written exercises. In fact, evaluations of them as students always took into account what and how much they did with written assignments. As a group, the teachers supported homogeneous classes as the best way to accommodate successful readers. Those who commented specifically said it was particularly beneficial for the subjects to be with high achievers because the latter, as a group, cause few behavior problems, are highly motivated, and allow a teacher to be a teacher rather than a disciplinarian.

Like the principals, the teachers appeared to know little about the subjects' families. What they did know reinforced what had been heard from the administrators; namely, that the parents were cooperative, supportive of the school, and interested in their children's work and behavior.

Having learned less than had been expected from principals and teachers, the researcher next turned to the subjects as a possible source of information in the attempt to understand why, in spite of all the obstacles that go along with poverty, they seemed to be "invulnerable."

Interviews with Subjects

As was pointed out earlier, only the top 15 readers were interviewed (see Table 5). The interviewing was explained by telling subjects that they would be asked certain questions with the hope that their answers might help students who did not read as well as they did.

The first of the 25 questions inquired, "Who helped you the most to be a good reader?" "What did they do to help?" came next. Thirteen questions then focused on the make-up of the subjects' families, on the reading habits of family members including those of the subject, and on a subject's after-school, weekend, and summer activities. Subsequent questions dealt with school--for example, with what the children did and did not like about it; with their favorite and least favorite teachers; and with the teachers whom they thought were the best instructors of reading.

Another series of questions inquired about their parents, in particular, about their expectations regarding school work; whether they helped with homework; what they did when a subject's grades were particularly high or low; and whether college or future occupations were ever discussed at home. At the end, each subject was asked why he or she thought some children find it difficult to learn to read.

As would probably be true of any group of 15 people, the subjects interviewed varied considerably in such areas as personality and the detail

with which they responded to questions. Asked about the number of books he had at home, for instance, one subject responded, "I dunno," whereas another appeared to count each one and then wondered aloud, "Should I count the four old ones that I threw in the garbage yesterday?"

All subjects appeared to take the interviews seriously; all watched carefully what the interviewer wrote when they answered a question; some even corrected the interviewer's spelling of siblings' names. Other similarities especially relevant for the research included the fact that all 15 subjects had books of their own at home obtained as gifts, from rummage sales, from special school purchases, or through RIF (Reading is Fundamental). All took out books regularly from the school library and read them both at home and in school. (Reading at home was referred to by subjects much more frequently than reading in school.) The seven subjects who did not use the city's one public library did not use it because it was too far from home and they had no way to get to it.

Consistently, the interviewees came across as children who did a great deal of reading, knew what kinds of books they liked, and appreciated teachers who let them read what they wanted to read. Equally clear was their disdain for workbooks and the need to write answers to questions about content in textbooks. The distinction between reading and what is done with reading in school was graphically portrayed by one girl who, when asked to explain what she meant when she said that she liked school reading "half of the time," said that the half she liked was "reading stories" whereas the half she didn't like was "doing the questions and doing the workbook."

Doing homework right after school turned out to be an unexpectedly common practice of the subjects. This was revealed with the question, "What do you do when you get home from school?" Eight subjects said they did homework immediately, while the other seven said they watched TV cartoons first and then did homework. One girl was a little more precise: "I watch the end of 'The Edge of Night,' then some cartoons, and then I do my homework." Another explained, "There's nothing on TV after 4:40, so then I do my homework."

Why homework received prompt attention was explained with comments like:

> I do it first because if something on TV is good, you won't do it.
>
> I do it while my memory is still fresh.
>
> If we don't do our homework before we watch TV, we have to go to our room.
>
> We have to do it before we play. Otherwise my mother says we'll be too tired.
>
> My mom says to do it first.

With just three exceptions, subjects said that somebody at home either helped with, or checked, homework. However, almost all the help referred to pertained to mathematics. For instance:

> My mother helps with problems. She breaks them down into parts.
>
> If I have trouble, my oldest brother helps because he's good at math.
>
> Sometimes my mother shows me how. She might do one example.
>
> My mother helps me if she knows how to do it.
>
> My brother learns fast. He helps. He'll say, "That's wrong."

Family members also figured prominently in response to the very first question posed in the subject interviews, which was, "Who helped you the most to be a good reader?" Eight gave credit to their mothers; one named his father (the mother didn't live with them); and another said that most of the help came from her mother and an older sister. The remaining five subjects mentioned a teacher, one of whom taught kindergarten. Of the other teachers referred to, one taught second grade, another had been the subject's third grade teacher, while the other two teachers had fourth-grade classrooms.

Parents continued to be mentioned when the question, "Why do you think some children find it difficult to learn to read?" was posed. To illustrate:

> Their parents let them go wild.
>
> Maybe their parents don't help them.
>
> Their parents don't take the time to help them.
>
> Some parents are out on the street and at taverns or at a disco.

The other common explanation for reading deficiencies had to do with a lack of interest. For example:

> Some don't like to read.
>
> If they don't like something, they don't think they have to do it.
>
> They might be like my brother and have their mind on dogs and pictures.

Subjects' comments about the teachers they thought were the best reading instructors failed to offer any insights about productive pedagogy because responses indicated "best reading teacher" was being equated with "favorite teacher." The latter was typically described with references to

acceptable discipline practices--for instance, "She didn't punish everyone if a couple of kids were bad," and "She was a fun teacher. We'd go outside if we were good." Another liked a teacher who gave them popcorn and showed films. That children will be children was reinforced at other times, too. Asked what he'd like to see changed in school, one boy said without hesitation, "I wish we had longer lunch and gym periods."

What the subjects' parents wanted were good grades. In response to a series of questions ("Do your parents want you to do well in school? How do you know? What do they do or say when you don't do well in school?") praise for high grades was always mentioned while six subjects referred to punishment for low ones. (Typical punishment was the withdrawal for a stipulated amount of time of favorite activities like watching TV, talking on the phone, and playing outdoors.) Responses of the other nine children when the question focused on the consequences of unsatisfactory school work divided between explanations like, "She (mother) works with me more" and "She don't say much, but you can tell when your mother isn't happy."

With one exception, the 15 subjects said that both they and their parents anticipated their attending college. The exception responded, "I don't even think about it" when asked whether he thought he'd go to college. Questioned about his parents' aspirations, he said, "I don't know."

The discussion of college uncovered the possibility that at least four of the 15 subjects (all girls) had a "significant other" in their lives. One of the four volunteered, "My uncle says that if I go to college, I'll be the first one in the family. He dropped out of school, so he really wants me to go." Another subject referred to an aunt, a college student, who had told her, "If you want to get someplace, you have to earn it."

In the case of the third subject, an older cousin with whom she had lived at various times was referred to twice as being both an exceptionally advanced reader and someone the subject wanted to be like. The fourth subject referred to an aunt, a teacher, who mailed her books and workbooks and to an older sibling--older by twenty years--who also kept her supplied with books. Not surprisingly, when this subject was asked, "Do you have any books of your own?" she responded, "Too many to count." She then described where she kept them: on bookshelves, in boxes, and under the bed. Those under the bed, she explained, were easy to get to at night.

Interviews with Parents

Parent interviews were scheduled after the subject interviews on the assumption that if a reversed order was used and parents knew the types of questions being asked, some might tell their children how to respond. With the selected sequence, data from the two sources were anything but contradictory. However, the parents provided more detailed information about rewards for good grades (e.g., a special treat or money). Their practices in this regard match what Katz (1967) and others have reported; namely, that reinforcers in black families are dominated by immediate material rewards. The parent interviews also provided much more information about the subjects' grandparents and about the children's preschool years. What they said about the early years mirrored what this researcher heard parents say in earlier studies (Durkin, 1966) of preschool readers.

With two exceptions, parents were interviewed at school. One exception, caused by a family emergency and the mother's unwillingness to be interviewed at home, took place in the researcher's car in front

of the home. The second exception took place in a bank where the mother worked part time and was held there at her request. Parents interviewed individually included 12 mothers, one father, and one stepmother. In the case of another subject, the mother and stepfather were both present.

While the questions asked of parents were organized around three topics (Subject, Parents, Family), each division included questions about school. The topic "Subject," for instance, included, "Did _____ attend Head Start or any other nursery school?" and "What did _____ learn there?" Under "Parents," questions like, "Do you go to school very much?" and "When you were in elementary school, were you a good reader?" were posed. Under the same heading, parents were asked whether they thought the schools were doing a good job teaching reading, and why. The category "Family" included questions like, "Did you read to _____ before she/he started school?"

The make-up of the 23 subjects' families was described earlier. Of the 15 children who were interviewed, two lived with their mother and father, one lived with her mother and stepfather, one was with her father and stepmother, while another was with his father. The other ten lived with their mothers. Of the 19 parents and stepparents, one had gone to college for three years; eleven had graduated from high school; one left high school a semester prior to graduation; one went to high school for three years; four went for two years; another had attended for one year. Among the 11 high school graduates, one spent an additional year in a welding school, another went to a beautician school for a year, while still another took courses at a junior college in order to be eligible to work in day care centers.

The families of four of the 15 highest achievers included grandparents. More important for the research is that grandmothers played key roles in five of the subjects' early reading ability. (Of the 15 subjects, 12 were said to be able to read before kindergarten. What the remaining three could do was unknown to the persons interviewed because (a) one was a step-mother who had been in the subjects' home only for the past two years; (b) one was a father who didn't see the subject in his early years because at the time the mother had custody of his two sons; and (c) one mother said that she was too busy with three children under the age of two to know for sure what the subject was able to do before starting school. She added, however, that her mother helped with the children and often read to them. She also commented, "If there wasn't any paper around, my mother would write the ABC's for them in the dirt.")

Of the five grandmothers who were the main source of help with pre-school reading, four were fully responsible for the children because their mothers lived in other cities. Based on interview data, these grandmothers spent considerable time reading to the subjects, teaching them the ABC's, and telling them what various words said. In all instances, mothers of the children sent books to the subjects, read to them when they visited, and let the children know how pleased they were with all they knew and could do. One of the four mothers who lived in another city at the time her son was a preschooler commented, "I helped him whenever I could because I wanted him to be something that I wasn't."

Six other mothers who cared for their own children and were responsible for the early reading ability were neither apologetic for offering the pre-school help nor vague about the kind they gave. For instance:

> I read to her . . . We played school at home. I told her words, taught her how to tell time, and helped a little with spelling . . . I'm a good reader myself, so I passed on hints about syllabication.

> I started reading to her when she was two weeks old. I had heard that babies pick up more than anyone thinks. I like children, so we started early with counting and the ABC's. I read to her and so did her older (by 20 years) sister. We had bocks and records, and they helped too.

Although spoken by one mother, the following explanation describes what motivated mothers of two boys and one girl to teach reading at home:

> She was the only child, and I wasn't working at the time. I didn't have anything to do. There was no television, so we spent a lot of time together reading.

Older children were said to have taught the two remaining subjects who could read before school. In one case, a sister who was a year older and "a very good student" was said to have done the teaching by playing school at home with the subject. The mother added, "Everyone in the house read to her (the subject) including her grandmother." With the other subject, an aunt and a cousin, both four years older, were credited with the teaching, again done in the context of playing school at home.

Data from both the subject and parent interviews indicated that all 15 children watched television daily. Only one parent mentioned supervising what was watched. "Sesame Street" was named in five parent interviews as being an important source of early help with letters and words. "The Electric Company" was cited by three parents as being helpful, while one named TV commercials as a preschool source of word identification for her son.

Parent interview data indicated that all 15 of the best readers went to kindergarten, four of whom attended all-day programs. Prior to that, eleven had been in Head Start classes. Somewhat surprisingly, little was said about the contributions or value of Head Start or of kindergarten even though questions about both were asked. Based on parent interview data, for example, attending Head Start had no influence on the subjects' interest in reading. In addition, even though 14 of the interviewees said "yes" when asked, "Do you think the schools are doing a good job teaching reading?" relatively little was said either about school or about teachers when the parents were asked to elaborate on their positive response. Elaborations included:

> His grades are good, and I didn't do it all.
>
> They seem to be patient.
>
> Compared to when I went to school, they're good.
>
> He started reading before the average. It's hard to tell. He's an easy, quick learner.
>
> As far as I know, I'm pleased with the teachers.

Only two elaborations were marked by enthusiasm for the school:

> They're doing a swell job. It's a good school. One of the best.
>
> I've been thoroughly pleased with both this school system and the one _____ was in before we moved here.

In another instance, a mother explained her positive response not by elaborating on the school her daughter attended but by describing with enthusiastic detail the Saturday morning film and book program that the public library sponsored in the city from which the family had moved two years earlier.

While interview data hardly portrayed the parents as being articulate or enthusiastic fans of the schools, nine made it clear that they viewed doing well in school as an important stepping stone to doing well in life. The following are illustrative comments:

> Her father had to leave school at 15 to go to work. He wants the children to do well in school so that they'll do better with their lives.
>
> I want him to be something. That's why we stress reading and math.
>
> All my brothers and sisters have done better than me because they were interested in school, and I wasn't.
>
> I want them to achieve more than I did.
>
> I threaten them about being a bum. I tell them you can grow up to be a dishwasher, or make money and have what you want. I threaten them about the importance of reading.
>
> I want her to go further than I did. You need education for a good job.

When asked why they thought the child being discussed did so well in school, 14 parents responded as follows. (The father of one subject--the parent interviewed--said he had had so little contact with his son until recent years that he was unable to answer the question.)

> "He's like my brother--he's bright."
>
> "I read to him starting at 10 months."
>
> "She was born mature."
>
> "He was born with wisdom. My brother was very smart."
>
> "Both me and his father (the parents were divorced) were good students."
>
> "I read a lot, so it just comes naturally."
>
> "She's fast and quick to catch on."
>
> "I started with him early on church books."

"It comes naturally with all the other kids reading. (Subject had five older siblings.)

"He had a smart father."

"I myself was a good reader."

"I started reading to her when she was two weeks old."

"I'm a reader myself, and so is she. She's not a TV person."

"She likes to read, so I guess it's practice."

Although other responses from parents also referred to the brightness of the subjects, the latter were not always thought to be the best student in their families. Where siblings existed, all possible classifications were used to describe them relative to the subject (better, about the same, not as good, poor student). Siblings who did not do well in school were typically described with words like "more interested in playing" and "a more active child."

While all 15 of the highest achievers in the study were said to attend church regularly, in only one case did church membership stand out sharply as a major factor in a subject's preschool reading ability. His mother was a member of Jehovah's Witnesses, which, she said, strongly support early reading ability since it allows for early reading of the Bible. Much that this subject was said to read at home at the time the parent interview took place was of church-related materials.

Actually, all 15 subjects were depicted as being frequent readers at home, some reading as many as 3-5 books per week. RIF (Daniel, 1976) contributed to what was available to read as did school libraries, which appeared to have a generous loan policy. Except for the six subjects who used the city's one public library, reading during the summer months was reduced substantially, sometimes to almost no reading at all. Subjects

who continued to read but lived too far from the public library to use it said they reread books they had at home, borrowed books from relatives and friends, or bought comic books. One subject said that he read all his mother's magazines, which included True Story. The other reason for the reduction in reading during the summer was an increase in outdoor activities.

Summary: Subject and Parent Interviews

That the best 15 readers among the 23 subjects were alike in a number of significant ways stood out in the combined data from subject and parent interviews. For example, at least 12 (data were unavailable for the other three top readers) entered school already reading, having been helped to learn at home by various combinations of relatives. When the preschool help was described, references were never made to the large number of books now available that are directed to parents for the purpose of teaching them how to teach reading at home in school-like ways. Instead, reading to the children, teaching them the ABC's, and telling them what words said were some of what was done at home. Parents also referred to the positive influence of "Sesame Street" and "The Electric Company," especially in fostering early interest in letters, numbers, and words.

Although all 15 subjects were frequent viewers of television, parent interview data indicated that homework was not neglected as a result. Actually, concern about getting homework done turned out to be only one of the ways in which parents showed how seriously they took school even though none seemed to know very much about the school's instructional program. Without question, they viewed doing well in school as the means for

achieving the good life. Doubts that their children could do well if they worked hard were not expressed. Instead, the underlying theme of responses was the American Dream: If you want to do well and are willing to work, success is yours.

That the subjects were and continue to be avid readers was also supported repeatedly in both sets of interviews. Also made clear is that library loans, rummage sales, and special programs like RIF, make it possible for children from low-income families to experience reading as one of life's most enjoyable activities. And, apparently, while the subjects were enjoying their books, they were also demonstrating that like all other skills, reading is perfected with practice.

Noticeable by their absence in both groups of interviews were references to the school as accounting for the subjects' achievement in reading. With the parents, the omission might be explained by the fact that some had other children who were unsuccessful, although attending the same schools. This may have encouraged them to consider non-school factors when asked to explain why they thought the subjects were successful.[6] For the most part, parents explained the success as being rooted in heredity, in the example of others reading at home, and in the preschool help that the children had received.

Discussion

Paralleling the medical profession's current interest in wellness, the research just reported concentrated on academic success, in particular on successful readers from a population whose failure is what is commonly highlighted. The hope for the study was that information about individual poor black children who are good readers might shed light on what can be done to augment their number. Before what was learned is discussed, some of the limitations of the study will be recognized.

Limitations of the Study

One obvious limitation is the size of the sample; nonetheless, the small number of subjects facilitated carrying out one pre-research decision: to collect much of the data from individual interviews. Admittedly, interviews have their own shortcomings especially for learning about the past. Other possible flaws are wrong questions and less than accurate answers. The combination of white interviewer and black interviewee, which was common in the present study, prompts still more questions, although it has been found (Steffensen & Guthrie, 1980) that such interviews stand a good chance of succeeding when it is clear to the interviewees that they have information that the interviewer does not possess. That interviews in the present study yielded accurate information gets additional support from the fact that even though four different groups were interviewed independently (principals, teachers, children, parents), responses to similar questions were not conflicting.

From this writer's perspective, the major shortcoming of the research is that it was limited to a study of success, which prevents it from

identifying the critical factors that distinguish poor black children who are good readers from other poor black children who are not. One finding in the present study, for example, is the frequency with which subjects transferred from one school to another--even from one school system to another. However, had the transfer patterns of low-income children who are poor readers been traced, the subjects' mobility might seem like nothing in comparison.[7]

Since data from all the interviews indicated that subjects' families shared characteristics that contribute to academic success, and since it was also learned that not every child in these families was a good reader, it probably would have been enlightening to study all the children in the families. Such an extension of the study might have succeeded in identifying with specificity what directs some poor children toward academic achievement and what moves others in the direction of failure. Or, to put it differently, such a study might uncover what was right as well as what went wrong--or at least what was different from child to child in the families studied.

But now the question is, What did the research that was done tell about successful readers who are both poor and black?

Findings

One unexpected finding is that many began to read at home prior to attending school. (It was not predicted because the typical conception of

poor black families is one that makes preschool reading among the children an unlikely phenomenon.) This fact made the research more retrospective than had been anticipated.

Although parents in the present study were interviewed in 1981, anyone familiar with this writer's earlier work with preschool reading (Durkin, 1966) would have felt very much at home had they been present when these more current parents told how their children learned to read early. An interested, supportive adult who gave considerable individual attention to a young child and the availability of slightly older children who liked to play school at home are just two of the many common threads that run through both sets of data.

Another is the subjects' continued success with reading throughout elementary school. [How the 23 subjects in the present study did on the sixth-grade reading test (SRA Assessment Survey, 1974) is summarized in Table 6 along with data for the total population. When the top 15 readers in the present study--based on fifth-grade reading scores--are isolated and grouped, their mean grade-equivalent score on the sixth-grade reading test is 8.69. Individual scores ranged from 7.2 to 12.1.] A safe assumption for the present study is that a family's continued interest in the children's school work was one important reason for the year-after-year success. Another was the amount of reading done by the subjects, which provided practice, thus continuous growth.

Insert Table 6 about here.

What cannot be overlooked in efforts to explain the subjects' continued success is the likelihood that their positive start encouraged teachers to view them--to use Rist's expression--as "those expected to achieve." And, as has been shown repeatedly (e.g., Good & Brophy, 1973), a connection does exist between teachers' expectations and children's performance.

According to teacher interview data, subjects also profited from placements with better readers because that allowed them to have teachers who had the opportunity to teach, since discipline problems with such students are few in number. Benefits derived from placement with good students were also described with references to the students themselves: highly verbal, well informed, motivated, industrious, competitive. Such an atmosphere, the teachers believed, could have nothing but positive effects on the subjects.

That the subjects both liked to read and did read cannot be minimized as still another critical contribution to the grade-by-grade success they enjoyed. Or, as one of the mothers aptly put it when speaking of her daughter, "She likes to read, so I guess it's practice (that makes her a good reader)."

Exactly what principals and teachers contributed to the subjects' success remains unclear, since all the interviews (including those with administrators and teachers) gave so much of the credit to the family. The attempt to account for the subjects' invulnerability, therefore, must point to such factors as preschool reading ability; families that were deeply interested in school because they saw achievement there as a step toward a life that would be better than their own; and the subjects' love

of reading. Contacts with other good readers through homogeneous grouping, plus the chance with such groups to read suitably challenging material, can be listed as school contributions. (The problem with homogeneous groups, of course, is that they might also explain why other poor children are unsuccessful in reading). It is highly likely that school variables that were not uncovered also contributed to the subjects' achievements, since enough reports of "schools that work" with poor minority children are now available to indicate that what is or is not done in school clearly makes a difference. Nonetheless, data in the present study warrant the reaction, "What a testimony to the importance of the family!"

Implications

Before this research got underway, it was assumed that most of the implications of its findings would be for administrators and teachers. That hardly is the case, however. Instead, data from a variety of sources reinforce each other as they point up how stunningly effective families can be in initiating and sustaining their children's success in reading. Simultaneously, the same data conflict with the beliefs of those who have a stereotyped picture of the "poor black family" as one that is indifferent to, and uncaring about, their children's school work. More likely to be true is that there are as many different kinds of low-income black families as there are under any category of "family" that one can think of.

Because of earlier work with preschool readers (Durkin, 1966), the fact that subjects in the present study also read early was of special interest to this writer--although it has to be admitted that the possibility that they would be preschool readers was never entertained when the

research was being planned. What should be of interest to all is that how subjects in the present study started reading at home bears close resemblance to the way children in the earlier research learned. Or, to make the same point differently, neither group acquired reading ability in the structured, school-like way that is promoted in widely publicized books written for parents of preschoolers (e.g., Doman, 1964; Ervin, 1979; Ledson, 1975), or in the way that so many kindergartens and even nursery schools now introduce reading: through whole class drill on phonics, which is commonly supplemented with workbooks and ditto sheets. In contrast, subjects in both studies learned to read early because they had the attention of an adult who read to them, taught them how to count and name letters, and answered their questions about words. Often, this same adult did a great deal of reading herself. Sometimes, too, an older sibling or cousin contributed by playing school with a subject.

Even though data from the present research provide little information about school contributions to the success in reading that the subjects enjoyed, certain information about the schools was acquired that merits attention. To begin, waiting for people to come for interviews resulted in numerous opportunities to see and hear what goes on in principals' offices. Too obvious to miss in such settings is the large amount of time that some administrators are required to spend on discipline cases and serious family problems, the two of which are commonly related. Still more time goes to solving dilemmas like, What to do with sick children when nobody is at home because the parents work? While the conviction remains personally strong that every school merits and needs a close-at-hand source of assistance to improve its reading program, what was observed

suggests that as schools are now organized and run, relying on principals to be on-the-spot instructional leaders is unrealistic and even naive--except in small schools where behavior problems are few or in large ones that have an assistant principal.

When schools do have personnel who have both the time and the knowledge to provide instructional leadership, data from the present study point to the wisdom of their trying to convince both administrators and teachers that it is just as important to help children like to read as it is to teach them how to read. This is especially important now because with all the attention that goes to "time on task" and structured hierarchies of reading skills, reading for sheer pleasure or the desire to know are all too easily assigned to the category "recreation," even though nobody could be more "on task" or more involved with skills than the student who is engrossed in reading for pleasure or information.

That middle- and upper-grade reading programs are commonly weighted not in the direction of meaningful, extensive reading but of workbook and ditto exercises (Durkin, 1978-79) was reinforced in this study not only by data from interviews but also by the fact that not one subject named reading when the interviewer inquired, "What is your favorite subject in school?" In contrast, many subjects named math, perhaps because the school system had something special in mathematics in the form of a computer program. All this is to say that much needs to be done nationwide to change school reading into activities that are far more enticing and pleasurable than the vast majority of instructional programs are right now.

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Footnotes

[1]This is an appropriate time to express appreciation for the total cooperation and assistance that came from everyone involved in the study.

[2]The assistance of James Martin is gratefully acknowledged.

[3]The present writer conducted all the principal interviews.

[4]Because of scheduling problems--it was suggested by school personnel that teachers not be asked to come early or stay late--two of the interviews were conducted (and taped) by Dr. Mary Lickteig, a post-doctoral student in Elementary Education, who also assisted with such time-consuming tasks as recording data from school records and scheduling interviews. The remaining teachers were interviewed by the present writer. Dr. Lickteig also conducted (and recorded) three of the subject interviews.

[5]This was said of a magnet school, located in a low SES area, to which parents can petition if they want their children enrolled there. According to one teacher, it attracts both the rich and the bright. Two subjects, who lived in the neighborhood, attended this school, one since kindergarten, the other beginning in fifth grade. Of the latter student the principal said, "Being here has been good for _____. Now when his mother moves, he can still attend this school. Too often with these children, a move by the family means a change to another school."

[6]The same kind of reasoning may explain why principals and teachers gave so little credit to the school for the subjects' achievements. Believing that unsuccessful black students had the same curriculum, they may have looked to other sources as an explanation for the success of the subjects.

[7]When discussing the mobility of one subject, a principal volunteered in an interview held in January, "But you should see the records of others. I could show you some who have already moved four times this year."

Table 1

Reading Test Data: End of Fifth Grade

Fifth Graders	Achieved Raw Scores			Percentage at or Above Grade Level
	Range	Mean	SD	
Total Population (N = 1,065)	12(2.1) - 90(12.2)	59.5(6.0)	17.6	58.8
Girls: 550				
Boys: 515				
Whites (N = 818)	12(2.1) - 90(12.2)	63.0(6.2)	16.4	67.1
Girls: 410				
Boys: 408				
Nonwhites[a] (N = 247)	13(2.1) - 86(10.5)	47.8(5.1)	16.4	31.1
Girls: 140				
Boys: 107				
Subjects (N = 23)	58(5.8) - 84(9.8)	68.7(6.9)	7.3	100.0
Girls: 12				
Boys: 11				

Note. Number in each parenthesis is the grade equivalent score for the raw score cited.

[a] Include 7 Orientals and 2 Hispanics.

Table 2

End-of-Year Grade-Equivalent

Reading Scores for Subjects in Grades 1-5

Grade	Number of Subjects	Range	Mean
1	18	1.6-4.1	2.7
2	19	3.2-6.9	4.0
3	17	3.6-6.3	4.7
4	20	3.2-9.2	5.7
5	23	5.8-9.8	6.9

Table 3

WISC-R Test Data for the Twenty-Three Subjects in Grade Six

Scores	Range	Mean
Verbal IQ	92-124	103.0
Performance IQ	84-124	100.1
Full-Scale IQ	88-120	101.6

Table 4

Pearson Correlation Coefficients for WISC-R Test Scores and Fifth-Grade Reading Scores

WISC-R	Reading Achievement Test	
	Raw Score	Grade Score Equivalent
Verbal IQ	.63	.69
Performance IQ	.57	.60
Full-Scale IQ	.71	.77

Note. All the correlation coefficients in the table are significant at least at $p < .002$ level.

Table 5

Test Data for the Fifteen Highest Achievers

in Reading at the End of Grade Five

Source of Data	Range	Mean
Fifth-Grade Reading Test		
Raw Scores	67-84	72.8
Grade-Equivalent Scores	6.7-9.8	7.5
WISC-R Test		
Full-Scale IQ	94-120	104.2
Verbal IQ	94-124	105.7
Performance IQ	91-120	102.1

Table 6

Reading Test Data: Sixth Grade

Sixth Graders	Achieved Raw Scores			Percentage at or Above Grade Level
	Range	Mean	SD	
Total Population (N = 1,062)	8(2.1) - 89(12.9)	55.6(7.2)	18.8	56.6
Whites (N = 832)	8(2.1) - 89(12.9)	58.8(7.4)	18.2	63.9
Nonwhites (N = 230)	16(2.3) - 88(12.9)	43.9(6.2)	16.4	30.0
Subjects (N = 23)	48(6.5) - 85(12.1)	63.3(7.8)	9.8	87.0

Note. Number in each parenthesis is the grade equivalent score for the raw score cited.